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LAW OF THE BEACH

Continued from page 6

half out the water. Squalling gulls fluttered all around and above him, and dead ones clogged the dead aeroplane. But the sea seemed suddenly stilled; a ghostly column rose from below, blocking the full force of the wind. Another ghostly yellow mate towered a few yards away.

Slowly the meaning of those twin yellow funnels dawned upon him, bringing with it a superstitious thrill of terror and amazement. "The transport's stacks!" he moaned. "I struck the gulls hovering over it, and they smashed me down on the Manila's funnels! God!"

For a moment his brain whirled: his nerve came slowly back to him. He stared at the spectral funnels, the submerged superstructure of the ship. What so wonderful about it, after all? He was making a beeline seaward over the Gridiron when he first sighted the swamped steamer—he was headed in the same direction when he forgathered with her again in the darkness closer in. The gulls and the dead motor had done the rest.

But if his first situation was bad, this one was worse. A low, droning sound of many voices made him look back with startled eyes. A gunshot away lights flickered, and the splash of high-flung waters. "The wreck on the Gridiron!" He made out men going aloft on the spar, and the rattle of pulley blocks, the breeches buoy, set up and working—thank God for that!

Crossing over the ship, he had not flown so far, after all? Or was the swamped transport that held him afloat washing in? He remembered that Welsh had spoken of the strong ocean current that caught derelicts and flung them on the Gridiron. He must be in the grip of it now. The lights and the shouting grew plainer and plainer—and the red eye to seaward grew, glaring at him. What was that man shouting back on the beach, just before he took off? Something about the Katahdin. "Wiring to the Katy to come help?" He had not heeded then; but now he remembered, and in a flash the whole thing was clear to him.

"That wireless man called up the ram at sea, that's what! And she's coming back. That's her!" he said, ungrammatical, but grimly earnest. "And this lurking murderer here is making for that stranded ship, after smashing her once at sea! There's ship murder for you!"

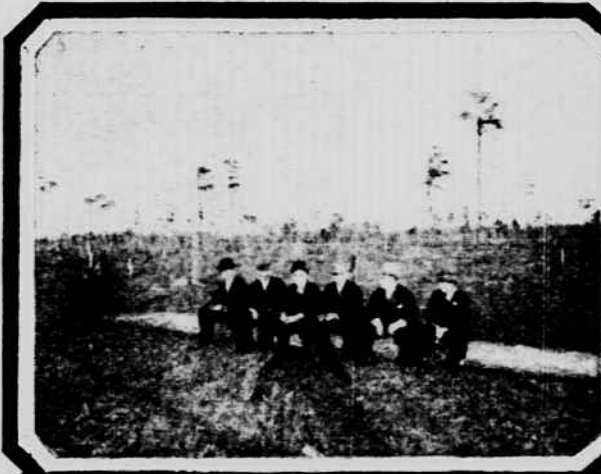
Welsh said that the deep sea current would drag ships in from a mile out and smash 'em on the Giants Fingers. He knew that now. The gap was closing terribly fast between the wallowing transport and the stranded liner. And the Katahdin was snoring in, making straight for him, almost on him. His brain whirled as he realized the trap he was in. Billy Handy and his profit-sharing plot were a forgotten fantasy. His life, not wealth, was at stake now. As the Ancient saw his lifetime in the emptying of a carafe, so Ford saw his death picture in the twinkling of an eyelash. If he hailed the ram, she would sheer off, certainly long enough to let the juggernaut Manila crash in on the stranded ship, to grind her to matchwood against the rocks. The life savers had not yet got all the crew off. If he remained silent, death was on him! He stood no chance, by boat or buoy; but the liner's crew were safe from this drifting horror. One life staked against many—the law of the beach!

FORD had not risked death in the teeth of the gale to defy that law now. Defiantly staring, he saw the ram looming over him, and he crouched low, waiting. The ram's knifelike prow slithered through the sea and struck squarely between her two yellow stacks, dividing the hulk like cutting a piece of cheese. They melted away, one to the right, the other to the left. The ram surged on.

"That's done, and I'm done—what matter? I lost those folks once; but I saved 'em twice over. An' now I'm going—"

The vortex of the ship dragged him down, flailing him with the wreckage of the ruined aeroplane. The bow wave of the ram rolled over him, washing him back. Faintly he heard a man shouting, and the thumping of the ram's screw as she passed. Then something struck the sea beside him and burst into a ring of fire. Ford knew what that was—a self lighting life float which flared up on contact with the water.

He was hardly interested; the instinct of life alone made him struggle free of entangling wires. The aeroplane was a rag of wreckage, sinking, sodden, under him. He leaped for the blazing buoy, flinging his arm over it. Then a big white boat, whalebacked



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